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Michael JOHNSON

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Abstract : This paper describes a longitudinal case study examination of EFL learning motivational change in two Japanese engineering students. Drawing on data collected in a series of interviews conducted over a three year period (in the participants' first, second, and third years of university), this paper describes various factors contributing to motivational development with a particular focus on how sojourning experiences influence changes in language learning motivation. Interview data indicated that English learning motivation fluctuated due to a variety of factors, most significantly the proximity of sojourning experiences and related goal-setting. These results support research into the dynamic nature of attitudes and motivation in language learners, and provide direction to others looking to conduct research in the area.

Key words : EFL learning, foreign language learning motivation, sojourning, study abroad

1. Introduction

English has taken on an increasingly important and complex role in Japanese society (McKenzie, 2008). The importance of the language has been recognized in recent policy documents published by Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in which it has identified English as playing a vital role in politics, economics, and international cooperation in the modern globalized world (MEXT, 2012). Despite the perceived importance of English to Japan's current and future competitiveness, and its potential professional and economic benefits to individuals, Japan continues to produce relatively few individuals who are professionally competent in the language. While there have been a number of reasons attributed to the overall lack of successful English learning outcomes produced from Japan's English education programs (see Gottlieb, 2005 for an in-depth discussion), one explanation cited repeatedly is the language's lack of

daily relevance for Japanese learners (Benson, 1991; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004). The lack of opportunity to use English, combined with an increasingly “inwardly-oriented” population of Japanese youth (MEXT 2012), has resulted in a population of learners who have neither the opportunity, nor desire, to use and develop their English language skills. To counter these trends, over the last decade MEXT has proposed a number of initiatives to improve attitudes towards, and competence in, English (MEXT 2002, 2003, 2008). One initiative is the promotion of study abroad opportunities for Japanese learners, which, according to the MEXT, could potentially contribute to both improvement in foreign language skills, and the development of broader global perspectives in Japanese learners (MEXT 2008, 2010).

For most, the value of studying abroad to improve foreign language learning is self-evident. Recent studies in the field not only provide empirical evidence to support this assumption, they more importantly inform us in detail as to how language learners benefit linguistically and affectively from such experiences. In a recent examination of twenty-four Spanish and Catalan EFL learners studying abroad, Angels & Munoz (2009) demonstrated that even relatively short durations abroad (3-4 weeks) could result in positive linguistic development. In particular, they revealed that most measures of oral fluency (particularly accuracy), and listening comprehension, improved, with lower-level learners demonstrating more linguistic gains in the short period of study abroad than advanced learners. The study additionally revealed that not only formal classroom study, but also part-time work experiences, contributed to this development. The benefits of short-term study abroad has also been recently substantiated by Llanes (2012), who in comparing paired sample groups of language learners who studied at home and abroad, revealed superior learning outcome from those who studied in another country.

Recent studies have also demonstrated that Japanese English learners can benefit from overseas study in a variety of ways. Sato (2012), in a study of twenty-four second year business students studying in three to four month programs in the US, demonstrated statistically significant gains in learners’ fluency, coherence and vocabulary. This study reflects the findings of Wood (2007), who also demonstrated English fluency gains in Japanese learners abroad. In examining a group of Japanese students learning English in Canada, results indicated an overall increase in fluency, with formulaic expression playing an important role in that development. In a recent study of Japanese learners abroad, Kobayashi (2009) revealed that learners benefitted differently from different types of programs. The study compared students who participated in self-initiated independent study abroad programs versus those who had studied abroad as part of formally organized collective study tours. These groups were compared on a variety of personality, perceived English skill, willingness to communicate, and satisfaction measures. The results indicated that those who participated in the formal collective programs rated their English ability lower, and exhibited less willingness to communicate, than those who studied abroad independently. However, both groups demonstrated similar degrees of satisfaction with their study abroad experience.

An interesting recent direction in study abroad and sojourning research is the exploration of the dynamic psychological state of sojourners, and how this contributes to affective and linguistic development. In a recent case study of two Korean learners studying in the USA and the Philippines, Yang and Kim (2011) demonstrated that L2 beliefs are constantly changing and developing in learners, as are their language learning goals. Furthermore, they have found that L2 learning behaviors are qualitatively affected by a remediation process which is part of the dynamic L2 belief system. In a mixed-method examination of seventy tertiary learners in the USA, Amuzie and Winke (2009) revealed that attitudes towards language learning changed significantly in learners from before to after arrival at their study abroad destinations. Results indicated that learners' attitudes towards the importance of the teacher declined, while they developed an increasing sense of the importance of learner autonomy and a growth in independence. These attitudes changed regardless of the period of time studied abroad, but changes in attitudes towards the importance of autonomy increased the longer learners studied abroad. Also observed were overall positive changes in learners' self-efficacy.

Recognition of the dynamic development of learner attitudes and beliefs in study abroad and sojourning research reflect ongoing inquiry into affective areas of language learning, including motivation. Language learning motivation has been the subject of numerous studies in recent decades (see Dornyei 2001; Barker 2005; Spolsky 2000, for summaries). Over this time motivation has been demonstrated to be one of the most important factors influencing second and foreign language learning success. The dynamic nature of language learning motivation, where it seen as changing, evolving and developing as learners themselves grow and change while interacting within classroom and social communities, has been demonstrated in a number of studies and theoretical models (Dornyei & Otto 1998; Ushioda 1996).

This paper will attempt to draw together the themes of sojourning and language learning motivation, and describe these as they relate to two Japanese tertiary engineering students learning EFL. In order to direct this study, the following two research questions have been developed:

RQ 1: How does sojourning affect language learning motivation?

RQ 2: What, if any, implications does sojourning have for language learning and teaching?

It hoped that through examining these questions that the relationship between sojourning and language learning motivation can be better understood, particularly in terms of Japanese engineering students learning EFL.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

Participants were solicited from an open call to participate that was distributed to first year

students at an engineering university in northern Japan. The two selected participants (Student A and Student B) were both engineering majors (civil engineering and aerospace engineering respectively), and were eighteen years-old at the time of the first round of interviews. Although both participants had studied English for the previous six years, both were at a false-beginner proficiency level; possessing low-intermediate to intermediate level grammar and reading skills, and underdeveloped, or beginner level, communication skills.

2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were conducted in the first semester of participants' first, second and third years of study. The interviews were semi-structured in nature, with base questions asking students about past and present motivational states, influences contributing to these states, the present status of their school lives, their degree of confidence in using English, and future goal and career orientations. Interviews were conducted in Japanese, and ranged in duration from between twelve and twenty-four minutes. Interview recordings were translated and transcribed into English scripts for analysis. Initial coding identified general themes which corresponded to the questions asked. Second round analyses confirmed themes and identified further explanatory details. This data was then used to compile descriptive yearly motivational profiles, which were used to illustrate and comparatively assess motivational developments and their contributing factors. Profiles were chosen due to their perceived efficiency in reducing and shaping qualitative interview data into digestible units of meaning that are more easily analyzed (see Seidman, 2006).

3. Results

Results have been summarized into descriptive yearly motivational profiles describing participants' motivational state at the time of each interview, and factors contributing to that state. These profiles are provided in chronological order for each participant below.

3.1 Student A: Year 1 Motivational Profile

Student A described his first year English learning motivational state as high. However, he explained that previously, in secondary school English classes, his motivation was mostly low, due mainly to teachers failing to explain things adequately, and uninteresting class content consisting exclusively of reading and grammar. He further explained that while his motivation was low throughout high school, it did increase temporarily while he was on a family trip to Hawaii. According to the student, being able to actually use English while shopping, and seeing how people responded to his English, made him more interested in learning and using the language. However, upon returning to Japan his motivation reverted to its previous low state. In describing his recent positive motivational change, he explained that it was due to being in a new university environment, having a foreign teacher, and experiencing classes conducted only in English. He also said that he

presently enjoyed university more than high school, particularly the freedom of university life, and that this too perhaps contributed to his present positive motivational orientation toward English. However, he explained that he had little confidence in using English, and while having a degree of confidence in listening, all other areas, particularly vocabulary, were weak. At present, the only goal he has in relation to English learning is to learn to speak the language fluently enough to use it in daily conversations overseas (despite not having any immediate plans to travel overseas). Currently, he is not thinking about his career, or of the possibility of using English in his future career.

3.2 Student A: Year 2 Motivational Profile

Student A described a gradual rise in his English learning motivation in the year since his previous interview, with his overall present motivational state being very high. Factors contributing to his increased motivation included on-campus factors such as interaction with international students in extracurricular clubs, volunteering to help with a visiting tour group from Australia, and succeeding in an advanced level English class. Student A also described being positively influenced by a friend's return from studying overseas, an event that also inspired him to consider studying abroad himself. Despite a largely positively motivated year, Student A explained that his motivation did temporarily go down while taking an English class he perceived as being uninteresting, and at times when he felt that the amount of engineering homework overwhelmed his time and energy to study English. Current language goals include studying abroad, and preparing to take the TOEFL test. While currently thinking about a possible career in media, he said career plans were not currently affecting his English learning motivation. While still not confident with using English, Student A expressed a feeling of gradual improvement.

3.3 Student A: Year 3 Motivational Profile

Student A described his present motivational state as very high. His motivation increased early in the year when he resolved to study abroad, and remained high while taking part in the competitive application process of a university-sponsored overseas program. After being accepted into the program, his English learning motivation temporarily fell. However, it rose again shortly thereafter upon his realization of the importance of the language for his life and studies abroad. Earlier in the year his motivation rose during and after a private spring break trip to the USA. During the trip he stayed in youth hostels in California where he met a number of travelers from around the world. At this time he said he felt obliged to speak more (not just listen), and this interaction inspired him to work harder on his English. He explained that he was gradually feeling more confident overall in his English skills, and that his time in the US was particularly helpful for his listening ability. However, being in America also demonstrated that he needed to work harder on his limited conversation skills. His present language learning goals relate solely to preparing for overseas study, while future career thought has dissipated.

3.4 Student B: Year 1 Motivational Profile

In describing his previous English learning motivation, Student B described a gradual movement from high motivation in junior high school to an overall low state in high school. His sustained low motivational state in high school was punctuated briefly by a single semester rise that he experienced while taking an English class at cram school. He was motivated by this particular class due to its good teacher, interesting content, and the ease in which he learned a substantial amount of new vocabulary. His present motivation was described as high due to the freedom he was experiencing in his university life, the opportunity to study rockets and aeronautics, and a desire to study abroad. Present demotivators include the difficulty of engineering classes, and the easy nature of some of the freshman review classes. In terms of English classes, he stated that his motivation is presently somewhat adversely affected in a class that is taught through grammar translation methods, and also by the fact that only two English classes a week will not be enough for his English to improve. However, despite these perceived negative factors, Student A explained that he felt that if he worked hard on his own, he could improve his English level. Currently, he expressed little confidence in learning English, explaining that long reading passages and listening were particularly difficult for him. His future goals are to write and speak fluently, and to study about aeronautics in English abroad.

3.5 Student B: Year 2 Motivational Profile

Student B described his present English learning motivation as in significant decline, and presently rather low. The first reason cited for this drop was because he only had English classes twice a week; he felt this was simply not enough time to improve his English level. Additionally, he said he was too busy with his engineering classes and assignments to study English on his own. He explained that while he enjoyed university overall, that there were many unsatisfactory aspects of his school life including math and physics classes. He expressed little confidence in learning or using English, as well as an emerging feeling that English is not a good subject for him. His stated English learning goals were primarily to do well in classes and pass his exams, and, if possible, to study abroad. His career aspirations still focused on jobs in the aerospace industry, and perhaps working overseas, although these were explained in vague and uncertain terms.

3.6 Student B: Year 3 Motivational Profile

Student B's motivational level rose from low to high over the course of the year, and is currently at a very high state. This rise was attributed to a short-term study abroad experience, in which the student spent almost three weeks in a language and culture program at a university in Australia. While he feels very highly motivated, he is somewhat frustrated with not knowing what to do with his present motivation to learn English. He finds himself very busy with his engineering studies, and feeling somewhat disillusioned with the pure lecture classes he receives in Japan, especially when he

compares these with the seminar style discussion classes he experienced in Australia. In terms of English language study, a lower-than-expected TOEIC score currently detracts somewhat from his motivation. He is generally enjoying school life at the moment, and wants to travel more throughout northern Japan while still a student here. While he described continued low levels of confidence in his English skills, he explained that he felt that he had improved overall, and that his experience overseas demonstrated to him that he can in fact communicate better in real life than in the classroom. Ongoing self-perceived weaknesses include grammar and vocabulary. His positive experience studying overseas directed his goals toward long-term study abroad and taking the TOEFL iBT. Regarding his career, he stated that his priority is to first study abroad, and then use the language skills and knowledge he would gain to help him choose a career path within the aerospace industry.

4. Discussion

The motivational profiles above illustrate that sojourning appears to affect language learning motivation in a variety of ways and at a number of levels. Before discussing the results, it is necessary to define what exactly is meant by sojourning in the context of this discussion. When compared with the term “study abroad”, which is a trip engaged in for specific educational purposes, sojourning is defined in this paper as a broader concept which encapsulates not only study abroad, but also other temporary trips overseas that put the sojourner in direct contact with target foreign language populations. As a lack of opportunity to interact with English speaking populations is an often cited explanation for Japanese learners’ poor English learning outcomes (Benson 1991; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004), contact, whether in formal classrooms or in informal travel contexts, both potentially provide opportunities for the learner to use and experience English in settings they do not encounter at home.

While short-term sojourns have been demonstrated to have positive linguistic effects on learners (Angels & Munoz, 2009; Llanes, 2012), the profiles of the two participants above indicate that they also can have a positive influence on learners’ affective states, specifically in terms of language learning motivation. Prior to university, Student A described a trip overseas as being the only motivating influence during his secondary school English studies. In particular, he found that testing the language in authentic settings and receiving immediate feedback was a stimulating experience. His experiences on another short-term private trip to California during university served as a further motivator, where through interacting with fellow travelers he was able to gauge his actual strengths and weaknesses, and better understand the participatory component of communicative competence. Student B’s short-term study abroad experience in Australia served to reinvigorate waning motivation. In his second year of university he described his motivational level as particularly low, with his goal being only to pass and do well on his English exams. However, following his trip abroad in Year 3, he returned to Japan in a highly motivated state. Declining motivation in the second year of tertiary study has been shown to be a particular problem with this population of Japanese

tertiary learners (Johnson, 2012, 2010). However, as these results indicate, short-term sojourns, either on private trips or in collective study tours, appear to provide a possible means for stimulating English learning motivation in learners whose motivation has declined.

Both participants' English learning motivation was positively influenced by the prospect of long-term study abroad. With Student A, going through the study abroad selection process and then preparing for the program contributed to his ongoing motivation. It is particularly interesting to note that Student A's stimulus to study abroad was due to vicarious insights into the experience provided by a friend who had recently returned from overseas study. The strong influence of peers in this capacity provides a potential resource to educators trying to promote study abroad to their students.

While Student B had expressed an ongoing interest in long-term study abroad in early interviews, his study tour experiences, particularly communicating in English and learning in a new classroom context, appeared to provide impetus for him to actually actively pursue such study. While this had not yet been realized by the time of the Year 3 interviews, his goal-setting in regard to studying for the TOEFL iBT, and using a long-term study abroad experience to inform his career selection process, reflects a higher level of specificity in goals than in previous years. The study tour to Australia also positively affected Student B's self-efficacy, and in turn provided him with the confidence that he could in fact succeed in a longer term study abroad program. Where he lamented about his English level in Year 2, following the Australia study tour he expressed the feeling that he thought he could in fact communicate better in real life than he could in the English classroom in Japan. These comments reflect the fragility of Japanese learners' English learning self-efficacy (Burden, 2002; Tsuchiya, 2006; Ebata, 2008), and emphasize the need for English teachers in Japan to provide positive feedback and learning experiences that engender feelings that learners can in fact communicate in English if they make the effort to do so.

5. Conclusion

As the yearly motivational profiles presented above demonstrate, English learning motivation in the two learners examined fluctuated over the course of their English studies, and these changes can be attributed to a number of different factors. While it was demonstrated that the teacher, instructional materials, the classroom environment, contact with international students, time constraints due to other required classes, and students' own perceived level of proficiency influenced motivation in a variety of ways, sojourning was observed to be a consistently positive factor. Short-term sojourns were identified as an effective means for bringing students out of low motivational states, increasing English learning self-efficacy, and inspiring students to seek out longer study abroad experiences. While the participants in this study had yet to actually take part in long-term study abroad programs, planning and preparing to do so solidified goal-setting and fostered ongoing motivation. These findings suggest that foreign language programs and teachers should indeed encourage sojourning as a means for increasing language learning motivation, and that

the promotion of such would be enhanced with the support of peer sojourners.

While the qualitative nature of this study and its data being drawn from only two subjects may limit the applicability of its findings, it provides a suitable starting point for further studies into the effects of sojourning on Japanese tertiary students' English learning motivation.

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